



State Representative Erik Poulsen



It's time to invest in Education

January 1998

Dear Friends and Neighbors,

Today, more than ever, Washington's children need us to be the kind of parents, citizens and leaders who support strong public schools. Are we up to the challenge?

During the current 60-day Legislative Session, we'll have a rare opportunity to help school children and property-tax payers at the same time. Thanks to a state revenue surplus of more than \$850 million, we can reverse the state's declining support for public schools, ease some of the growing pressure on local school levies, and still have funds available for further state tax relief and rainy-day savings.

Poll after poll shows that parents and citizens are ready to seize this opportunity to improve schools. So is Governor Locke. The stumbling block is in the Legislature, where key members of the Republican majority claim that schools neither need nor deserve more state help, because "huge increases in education budgets have bloated the education establishment" (Seattle Times editorial, Oct. 3, 1997).

Nothing could be farther from the truth, or more insulting to our hardworking teachers. This is the worst possible time for the Legislature to shortchange education when schools are gearing up to help kids meet higher academic standards that will in place by the year 2000.

The Legislature's response to the challenges facing our schools will profoundly affect our children's future and the strength of our community. We don't need to increase state taxes or bureaucracy to do what's right. We only need the willpower to take advantage of existing resources.

As always, I look forward to hearing your questions, ideas, and concerns. Thank you for the privilege of representing you!

Sincerely,

A blue ink signature of Erik Poulsen, written in a cursive style.

Erik Poulsen

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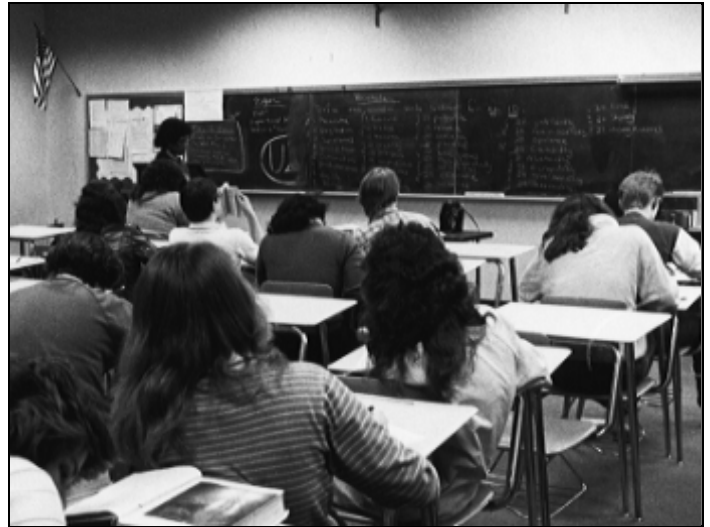
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Per-student spending has slipped

Our constitution makes support for basic education the “paramount duty” of state government. Washington’s revenue surplus offers a great opportunity to reverse the decline in state funding for public schools and ease some of the pressure on local property-tax levies.

- This year’s funding is \$68 less per student than last year, when inflation is considered.
- Next year’s funding will be \$101 less per student than last year —\$261 less than in 1993.

The Legislature should honor its constitutional commitment to education — and to our children — by simply restoring per-child education funding to the level at which it sat in 1993. We have already reduced taxes back to the level they were in 1993. It’s time we did the same for our schools and our students.



Our classroom sizes are third worst in U.S.

This opportunity to invest in our schools comes at a crucial time for Washington’s students, who are now expected to achieve the new higher academic standards that will be fully in place by the year 2000.

- Kids who master the “essential learning requirements” reflected in these higher standards have the best chance to get the best jobs and best incomes in the emerging “information economy.” Students who can’t meet these standards face a greater risk of failing in life.
- In recent 4th grade tests of 68,000 students, only 14 percent of the students met the new standards in all four critical skills — reading, writing, math and listening.

We must address the problem of overcrowded classes if we want Washington’s kids to achieve at higher levels. Only three states have more crowded classrooms than we have, and one of these states, California, has just launched a bipartisan \$2 billion plan to reduce class sizes.



Rebutting the myths

Criticizing Washington's teachers for school problems is wrong. Even with the state's declining support for schools, the state dropout rate has improved by 33 percent over the past eight years. And, SAT scores have risen steadily over the past five years.

The claim that administrative costs are bloating education budgets is also false. OSPI has the smallest per-student expense in the nation — \$22, less than a third of the \$68 national average for state school administration. Since 1973, state and district-level administrative costs have dropped 26 percent, and school-level administrative costs have dropped more than 15 percent.



Educating tomorrow's leaders is important to me. That's why each year I sponsor students to serve as Legislative Pages in order to gain first-hand knowledge about state government.

My proposal for improving school funding

The present estimate of ongoing revenue in excess of the I-601 spending lid is \$348 million for this biennium. I propose that we use a significant part of that surplus to invest in these four areas:

- **Reduced class sizes in grades K-8.** Local school districts would decide in which grades students most need the help that smaller classes and more individual attention from the teacher will do the most good.
- **An incentive for school districts to offer tuition-free, all-day every day kindergarten.** This will help us achieve our education reform goals by raising academic effort and achievement in the critical early years. Preference in funding will go to those districts with the highest number of students on free- and reduced-price lunches.
- **Additional out-of-classroom help** that many students will need to acquire the skills and knowledge mandated in our new academic standards. This “time for excellence” might include after-school assistance, Saturday academies, summer school, one-on-one mentors, or other locally designed solutions to help students meet the new standards.
- **Professional development** to enable teachers to make the most effective and efficient use of technology in the classroom.

I truly hope you'll closely follow activity at the Legislature this year, especially as it affects our children's education. Again, I'm eager to hear from you.



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Schools are too dependent on property taxes

Declining state support for schools hurts everyone by putting upward pressure on property-tax levies.

- The share of overall school funding paid by special property-tax levies has nearly doubled since 1980 — rising from 7.5 to 14.5 percent of the total bill.
- In 1985, the state paid 60 percent of statewide school construction costs. But now, local property taxes pick up that percentage of the costs. The state pays just 40 percent.

People in our district have demonstrated they care about kids and schools. Unfortunately, we've struggled to pass local school levies because even a small increase is expensive to homeowners. The 60 percent supermajority requirements for school levies also hurt their chance of passage.

In the end, we all pay the price for failed school levies because a well-educated citizenry is the key to our quality of life and economic vitality.



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